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Utility pays Forest Service \$14.75 million in wildfire settlement

July 28, 2009 | 5:57 pm

Pacific Gas & Electric Co. is paying the U.S. Forest Service \$14.75 million to settle damage claims stemming from a 1999 forest fire in Northern California.

The payment is the second largest of its kind to the agency, according to the U.S. attorney's office. Last year the Forest Service won a \$102-million settlement from Union Pacific Railroad Co. in a lawsuit involving another Northern California wildfire.



Downed power lines have been blamed for a number of destructive wildfires in the state, including last year's Sesnon fire in the San Fernando Valley, several of the 2007 blazes in San Diego County and the Malibu Canyon fire that same year.

The October 1999 Pendola fire started on private land when a big pine tree fell on a transmission line. The line shorted, igniting the tree. A total of 11,725 acres burned, about a third of which was in the Tahoe and Plumas national forests.

The fire burned for 11 days and cost \$4.2 million to fight. More than \$10 million of the settlement is compensation for natural resources damage. Most of the payment will go to the Plumas and Tahoe.

The settlement was reached through mediation without a lawsuit. "We're happy to have reached a resolution with the Forest Service and we regret the damage caused by this incident," said PG&E spokesman Brian Swanson.

The government said that the pine was rotten and hazardous and that the utility should have inspected and removed the tree to keep it from crashing onto the line.

In the past decade, Swanson said PG&E has stepped up inspections of distribution lines and now spends about \$170 million a year on vegetation management. The utility's contractors trim or cut 6,000 trees a day along 132,000 miles of overhead power lines, he added.

In Southern California, San Diego Gas & Electric is proposing to turn off power to eastern San Diego County customers living in high fire hazard zones when severe Santa Ana wind conditions develop that could topple power lines.

About 60,000 customers live in the hazard zones, but the utility estimates no more than 10,000 would be affected at any time. The shut downs would probably be necessary once or twice a year.

-- Bettina Boxall

Photo: Downed power lines on Malibu Canyon Road after a 2007 wildfire. Credit: Los Angeles

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B-023-001: Comment Noted (In Review)

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The Environmental Impact Statement is anticipated to be completed in late 2010 and will be available at <http://www.usda.gov/rus/water/ees/ea.htm>.

Times / Ken Hively

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